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ABSTRACT

A study examined the errors in the use of prepositions, particularly of prepositional verbs, made by native Greek speakers learning English. Two tests were constructed, one a translation of a Greek text into English and the other a series of English sentences to be completed with the appropriate prepositional word based on the Greek equivalent offered. Subjects were 50 first-year university students with similar linguistic, sociocultural, and educational backgrounds. Error analysis was performed in three stages: recognition; description; and explanation of errors. Statistical analysis was carried out on the 306 errors committed by the subjects on the two tests. Results indicate that: (1) intralingual and developmental errors were 1.6 times more frequent than language transfer errors, and were almost exclusively syntactic; and (2) language transfer errors were mainly lexico-semantic and only partly syntactic. Pedagogical implications of the findings can be summarized as follows: when teaching preposition use to Greek learners of English, teachers must emphasize the differences in prepositions in the two languages and stress the structure and syntax of the English prepositional verbs in addition to their semantics. Sample tests and a brief bibliography are appended. (MSE)

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AN ANALYSIS OF ERRORS COMMITTED BY GREEK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN PREPOSITIONS

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to analyse errors that Greek learners of English commit on prepositions and their uses. The area of prepositions is characterized by overdifferentiation on the English side and underdifferentiation on the Greek side. By underdifferentiation we mean that in Greek we use fewer prepositions for more concepts or meanings, while in English we have overdifferentiation regarding prepositions, i.e. we use more prepositions for the same number of concepts or meanings.

It is a usual phenomenon for students to commit errors in areas of over and underdifferentiation between their mother tongue, L_1, and the target language, L_2. This was the main reason why prepositions were selected as the field of error analysis for this study, and particularly the ones which are closely related to a certain category of verbs, called "prepositional verbs".

According to "A Grammar of Contemporary English" by R. Quirk et. al. (1985), a "prepositional verb" consists of a lexical verb followed by a preposition with which it is semantically and / or syntactically associated.

Thus in the sentence, "We disposed of the problem", the word "disposed" remains morphologically a verb, being the item which has variable inflection. But the sequence "disposed of " also functions in various ways as a single unit. It is this extended sense of "verb" as a "unit" which behaves to some extent either lexically or syntactically as a "single verb" that we use in labels such as "prepositional verb". In other words, the preposition that follows the verb, is more closely related to the verb, which determines its choice, than to the prepositional complement, i.e. the object after a prepositional verb.

2. Elicitation Procedures

For the error analysis of the above type of prepositions two tests were constructed. The first test (Test A) was a translation of a Greek text into English. The second test (Test B) consisted of 45 sentences in English. In each sentence there was a blank which represented a prepositional verb. The greek equivalent of this verb was given in a parenthesis following the sentence. Students were asked to fill the blank with the appropriate prepositional verb, taking into consideration the greek word in the parenthesis.

The tests were constructed in such a way, as to make students incorporate in their answers the grammatical features we wanted to test, i.e. prepositions that follow prepositional verbs. Test A and a sample of Test B are reproduced in the Appendix.

3. The Subjects

The above tests were given to 50 students of the first year of studies of the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Thessaloniki. They were all about the same age, approximately 19 years old, with about the same linguistic background in both their native language Modern Greek, and English. They had had lessons of English in their secondary school for six years, and at the same time most of them had attended supplementary courses of English in the evening. After graduation from the secondary school they had been admitted to the English Department, University of Thessaloniki, on the basis of nation-wide entrance examinations. From October 1989 until the date of the tests, March 1990, they attended the courses of the first year of studies in the above Department.

Furthermore, their sociocultural background was almost similar and there was no difference in the way they used and perceived their mother tongue.

4. Stages of Error Analysis

Following the method proposed by Corder (1974), the analysis of errors was carried out in three stages, namely, recognition of errors, description of errors, and explanation of errors.

At the recognition stage, all the wrong utterances were corrected and listed together with the corresponding correct ones.

The description of errors is a linguistic operation. In the present error analysis we concentrated mainly on the syntactic and the lexico-semantic level, disregarding other levels of analysis.

The last stage of error analysis is the explanation of errors. It is concerned with accounting for why and how errors come about. The explanation of errors belongs to the field of psycholinguistics, and is still largely speculative, because of the absence of a generally accepted theory of language learning or acquisition.

During this stage, errors were classified in two categories, according to their causes. The first category is Language Transfer Errors, which are used when the learner transfers into his performance of L_2, the habits of his mother tongue. Selinker (1969) defines transfer in language as "the carry - over of structural patterns of one's native language into a foreign language".

The second category of errors are the Intralingual and Developmental Errors. As Richards stated in 1974, these errors "reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage, illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition, and are representative of the sort of errors we might expect from anyone learning English as a second language"

These errors are due to several causes, such as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized, etc.

Following are some examples of errors that Greek learners committed, and their probable explanations :

Example a : "He insisted to go to the cinema"

A "plausible interpretation" of the above erroneous sentence would be:

"He insisted on going to the cinema".

Here we have violation of the syntactic rule according to which the verb "insist" is constructed with the preposition "on" + gerund.

This error is probably due to mother tongue interference, because the above utterance is a word -to -word translation of the equivalent greek utterance :

"Επέμενε να πάει στον κινηματοχράφο".

Example b : "He boasted for his success at billiards".

A plausible interpretation of the above utterance would be :

"He boasted of / about his success at billiards".

The above unacceptable utterance is due to mother tongue interference, as the learner transfers the basic meaning of the equivalent greek preposition "για" into English. The greek translation of the above utterance would be :

"Καυχήθηκε για την επιτυχία του στο μπιλιάρδο".

Example c : "I forbid you to interfere to my private life".

A plausible interpretation of the above utterance would be :

"I forbid you to interfere in my private life".

In this example, the student ignores that the verb "interfere" has to be followed in the above context, by the specific preposition "in", not on the basis of the meaning of the preposition, but on the basis of the valency of the verb.

This error is probably due to overgeneralization, which covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language. It may be the result of the learner reducing his linguistic burden.

It should be noted that there were instances where an erroneous preposition could be ascribed to more than one categories of causes. In such cases, priority was given to the most prevailing cause.

5. Statistical Analysis - Results

Finally, a statistical analysis of the 306 errors committed by the students in both tests A and B was carried out.

Table 1 gives the distribution of these erros according to the linguistic level.

Table 1
Distribution of errors according to the linguistic level

Linguistic Level	Number of Errors
Syntactic	222 (73%)
Lexico-semantic	84 (27%)
Total	306 (100%)

According to this table, the syntactic errors are about 2.6 times more frequent than the lexico-semantic errors.

Table 2 gives the distribution of errors according to their causes.

Table 2
Distribution of errors according to their causes

Category of Errors	Number of Errors
Language transfer errors	116 (38%)
Intralingual and developmental errors	190 (62%)
Total	306 (100%)

According to this table the intranlingual and developmental errors are about 1.6 times more frequent than the language transfer errors. This is in agreement with Nickel (1989), "That the majority of the grammatical errors second language learners make do not reflect the learner's mother tongue is not really a "discovery"."

Table 3 gives the distribution of errors according to both their linguistic level and their causes.

Table 3
Distribution of errors according to both their linguistic level and their causes

Linguistic level	Language transfer errors	Intralingual and developmental errors	Total
Syntactic	32 (28%)	190 (100%)	222
Lexico-semantic	84 (72%)	0 (%)	84
Total	116 (100%)	190 (100%)	306

From this table, the following conclusions could be drawn :

a) Both linguistic levels, i.e. syntactic and lexico-semantic, are represented in the Language Transfer Errors.

b) On the contrary, only syntactic errors are included in the Intralingual and Developmental Errors.

c) The highest percentage of the Language Transfer errors are Lexico-semantic (72% as compared to 28% of syntactic errors).

Table 4 gives the distribution of the erroneous transfers of Greek prepositions into English.

T a b l e 4

Erroneous transfers of Greek prepositions into English

	English Prepositions									
Greek Prepos.	for	about	in	at	to	on	into	of	from	Total
για	79	10				2		1		92
σε			49	22	45	17	10			143
από								1	3	4
Total*	79	10	49	22	45	19	10	2	3	239

According to this table, each Greek preposition was wrongly transferred into English by more than one prepositions. For example, the greek preposition "για" was translated into English as "for" 79 times, as "about" 10 times, etc. Also, the greek preposition "σε" was translated into English as "in" 49 times, as "at" 22 times, as "to" 45 times, as "on" 17 times, and as "into" 10 times.

This is a confirmation of our previous statement that Greek prepositions are underdifferentiated.

6. Conclusions

As we have seen the main conclusions of our study could be summarized as follows :

a) Intralingual and developmental errors are 1.6 times more frequent than language transfer errors. Furthermore, these errors are almost exclusively syntactic.

b) On the contrary, language transfer errors are mainly lexico-semantic and only partly syntactic.

One should bear in mind that the above results depend on the type of the elicitation procedures used to obtain the corresponding data, and therefore should be considered with due caution.

* Cases where the English preposition was omitted, and some other cases of minor importance, were not included in this table.

7. Pedagogic Implications

The pedagogic implications of our study could be formulated as follows .

When teaching the use of prepositions to Greek learners of English, the teacher must emphasize the difference between the degree of differentiation of prepositions in the two languages, namely, the fact that prepositions are overdifferentiated in the English language and underdifferentiated in the Greek language. This difference must be pointed out in a more explicit way, especially to advanced learners of English. Therefore, the greek learner should never simply transfer into English the basic meaning of the greek preposition, but carefully search for the English preposition, which is appropriate for the case under consideration .

Furthermore, the structure and syntax of the prepositional verbs in English should be stressed to the learner. In other words, learners must be made aware that on the English side it is not only the senantics of prepositions that play the major role, but the syntax of the prepositional verbs. The prepositions which follow them, may not contribute significantly to the meaning of the verb, but they constitute extensions of the verb that can not be ignored.

In addition to the description of the language and the pointing out of differences, there should obviously be constant practice and exercises in the relevant areas.

APPENDIX
ELICITATION PROCEDURES

Test A

Instructions : Translate the following text into English.

Όταν ξύπνησε, είδε πως βρισκόταν σ' ένα έρημο νησί. Γρήγορα προσαρμόστηκε στην καινούρχια κατάσταση και ζούσε με φρούτα και φύλλα από φυτά. Ήταν ολομόναχος. Κανείς δεν υπήρχε να ανακατευτεί στην ζωή του. Σε κανέναν δεν μπορούσε να βασίζεται. Έπρεπε μόνος του να σκέφτεται τα πάντα, να τακτοποιεί τα πάντα, να αποφασίζει τα πάντα. Δεν πίστευε πιά σε θαύματα. Σιχά σιχά αφοσιώθηκε στην μελέτη της φύσης. Επέμενε να αντιμετωπίζει τις καθημερινές δυσκολίες με θάρρος και τελικά κατάφερε να επιζήσει.

Sample of Test B.

Instructions :

Fill the blanks with the appropriate prepositional verb (verb + preposition) that best completes the meaning of the sentence (Take into consideration the greek word in the parenthesis).

The waiter .....spilling the wine (ζητώ συχνώμη)
She ..... a small tennis club (ανήκω)
He ..... his success at billiards (καυχιέμαι)
They ..... his behaviour, which was not the proper one. (σχολιάζω)
I don't ..... his mixing with silly people. (επιδοκιμάζω)
Her father .... her engagement, after much consideration of the whole subject. (συχκατατίθεμαι)
They ..... the prisoner ..... his property and money (αφαιρώ)
The word isosceles .... Greek (προέρχομαι)
They ..... him ..... the club, because of his bad behaviour (αποκλείω).

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